

Form and Shape: Between Immutable and Mutable of My Lacquer Art

Fumie Sasai (Lacquer Artist. Associate Professor at Kyoto City University of Arts)

In the haiku philosophy of Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), there is a phrase “fluidity and immutability.” This means that both the constant changes of fluidity and the unchanging nature of immutability are based on the “sincerity of elegance” = “the essence of beauty.”

The lacquer used in lacquerware is the refined sap of the lacquer tree. I consider lacquer as a living material, and I consider life and heart as one and the same. The things I hold dear to my heart are kindness, love and friendliness. For me, these feelings of compassion overflow into flowers, fruits and children. This overflowing compassion becomes my passion and motivation to create artwork.

I have always used flowers, fruits and children as motifs as my “immutability” that express textures and shapes that make us want to touch them with the soft texture of the lacquer. For example, “Goldfish – fuwari” is one of my works.

The expression of the lacquer fluctuates and changes gradually as you spend time with it. This change has become my “fluidity,” and I adopted kasane and musubi of kimono as motifs to express the soft texture of lacquer and the beautiful shapes of a series of ridges. For example, “Kasane 7” is one of my pieces.

If I apply the concept of “Johakyu” (three segments of a play: slower and quieter at the “beginning” (Jo), gradually gaining tempo in the “middle” (Ha), and becoming more energetic at the “end”(Kyu)) from the court music Noh developed by Zeami (1363?-1443?) to my own lifespan of 20s to 40s, 40s to 60s, 60s to 80s, I would say that my 20s to 40s was the "beginning" of my career and was "fluid and immutable" and from my 40s to the present, when the tone (beat) has changed, is the “middle.” I have expressed unexpected focal points and “shapes” through stimulating collaborations with artists using bamboo, kirikane, and maki-e processes. For example, a work that looks like a “Sun ship” At the moment, I can’t think of anything that could be the final “end” (Kyu).

As you know, lacquer is a liquid that hardens into a solid when applied and sanded, but it occurred to me that the beauty of lacquer is its ability to go back and forth between liquid and solid. The reason I say “back and forth” is because the layer of lacquer on the surface of the artwork doesn’t end with one coat, but is formed by applying many layers. I think the process of applying multiple layers of lacquer is a way of moving back and forth between liquid and solid.

To elaborate on this simple idea, I want to look at both “form and shape” and “attraction and preference.”

Form and shape

With the progress of science, mysteries about nature, such as the world and the universe, have been revealed. We and other things are composed of particles smaller than atoms. The way these tiny particles are connected gives us “form.”

I try to use “form” and “shape” differently as much as possible. I use the word “shape” when I want to express my will or intention.

The process of creating a lacquer work is in the following order: prototype, coating, rough base, fine base, and painting. The rough base determines the general “shape” of the piece, and with the addition of the fine base, the piece is ready to be polished with a grindstone to create a “shape.” The precision of the “shape” increases over time.

The scientific “form” that results simply from the connection of particles has nothing to do with my will or intention. To create art, the mind of the artist must be reflected. In other words, art, unlike landscapes and scenery, is created with the consciousness of man. When the artist shifts connections of particles this way and that, sometimes violently, “form” becomes “shape” and a work of art is created.

An architecture professor lectured me on the nature of matter. He explained that the states of gas, liquid, solid, solid solution, and plasma, etc. are determined by the way small particles are connected based on quantum mechanics and statistical mechanics, and that the way these particles are connected is determined by pressure and temperature based on thermodynamics (forces) and can be expressed in mathematical equations of state. This was a difficult subject for me. These changes of state are called phase changes in the narrow sense and “phase transitions” in the broader sense. When an artist changes from “form” to “shape,” I believe this can be called a phase transition, since the phase represents the form and the transition represents the change of state.

By the way, someone once asked me, “Solid forms, as far as they can be visually recognized, consist of curved surfaces. Is it possible to consider the attractiveness of lacquer works in terms of their mathematical topology?”

As far as I learned in my lectures, topology is a way of symbolizing surfaces (generalized or written). Since “forms” are made up of surfaces, they can be symbolized by topology, and when symbolized, it is easy to find similarities and differences between one form A and another form B. For example, according to topology, a coffee cup and a donut are the same thing, i.e. they are similar and made of completely different materials, but in terms of “form” they are the same concept, i.e. they have a hole.

Whether the similarities recognized in this way become “a certain law” = “attraction” is another matter, I think. In other words, topology seems to be a way to look for contour = outline and silhouette features, but I wonder if contour and silhouette features are a part of “attraction” but not a big part of it.

For example, I think that the “shape” of my artworks consists of the interaction between “form” representing size and silhouette, “color” representing surface condition, and “texture and feel” (1+1=2+alpha).

I believe that the appreciation of a work of art depends on the five senses, that is, the sensory functions of the human body (sight of the eyes, hearing of the ears, smell of the nose, taste of the mouth, touch of the hands, feet and body). My lacquer work cannot be perceived through the senses of hearing, smell or taste. It relates to the senses of sight and touch. It is about the “forms” of size and contour, and the “surface condition” of color and texture.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the things I try to keep in mind when creating pieces is that they should make you want to touch them. This means that even if we don’t actually touch the object (i.e. the sense of touch does not play a role), our vision makes us feel the urge to touch it (i.e. our sense of touch wants to be activated). I believe that when we perceive something in our brain through our vision, we also use some of our sense of touch. This is the “interaction relationship” and what I explain as “plus alpha.”

Even if we take out the features of “form” using topology, we cannot describe the features of “color” and “texture” using topology, nor can we see the “plus alpha” that corresponds to the interaction between the two. So, topology is inadequate to understand “shape” and “attraction.” There are many kinds of lacquer finishing, such as “glazing” and “without glazing.” These play an important role in the attractiveness of the lacquer, but cannot be considered in topology

Lacquer is irreversibly converted from a liquid to a solid. However, since the lacquer that forms the “shape” is changed from liquid to solid by the application of many irreversible layers of lacquer, we can consider the lacquer that forms the “shape” to be reversible, going back and forth from liquid to solid.

Don’t you think that the reversibility of the lacquer forms a “shape” and highlights the “lines” which are the outline of the “shape”?

There are about 60 steps in the process of drying the lacquer, but it is only about 3 mm thick. In a thin layer, there are many layers and processes, and each process consists of repeated liquid to curing (solid) to polishing. I wonder if my “shapes” and “lines” exist in these many thin layers.

There are three processes in making my work: Sketching ideas \Leftrightarrow Making maquettes (study models in clay) \Leftrightarrow Making prototypes. At this point, “form” is translated into rough “shapes.”

These processes are not a one-way street. They go back and forth. In this back and forth process, the case where “as the form changes, the impression changes a lot” gradually disappears. In the end, only the “shape” remains. From the artist’s point of view, the case where “as the form changes, the impression changes a lot” is something that can be eliminated by trial and error.

Attraction and preference

“‘Shape’ based on the artist’s intention” – “liquid or solid ‘form’” = “‘attraction’ intended by the artist,” and I think that “attraction” is the “lines,” “surfaces” “spaces,” “colors,” and “texture and feeling,” etc. that make up the “shape,” and “attraction” = {line, surface, space, color, texture, feeling, etc.}

In the combination of {line, surface, space, color, texture, feeling, etc.} = “the artist’s idea or method,” there are no rules, laws, or order. In the case of lacquerware, for example, the “method” of making lacquerware has been cultivated by many people over the years since the Jomon (about 10,000 years before 3rd century B.C.) and Nara periods (8th century) to avoid mistakes in the manufacturing process and to ensure the durability of the objects.

There is a concept of “Shu-Ha-Ri” in artistic accomplishments and traditional art (three stages of mastery: the fundamentals, breaking with tradition, and creating one’s own techniques). I believe that through repeated training, which is the key to “Shu” and “Ha,” we can learn how to do things “freely” but there is no “freedom.” Your “method” becomes constrained by “local colors, branding, schools, etc.” and you actually become “constrained.” I wonder if we cannot become free until we achieve “Ri.” I think we need to be careful about the difference between “freedom” and “doing things freely.”

Taro Okamoto (1911-1996), by the way, makes a distinction between art and artistic accomplishments. He says, “‘Art’ respects the ‘new’ and one’s own claim itself without caring whether others will accept it, while ‘artistic accomplishments’ respects the attitude of adopting forms that were considered right in the past.”

For this reason, ‘art’ can start from “Ri,” and it is not wrong to deviate from the “way.” I think “the artist’s ideas and methods” should be “free.”

I think “freedom” has to do with “attraction.” The elements and factors of “attraction” are not fixed but are indefinite. Even if you try to identify the “attraction” of any artist or any work, it may be that it applies to only some parts of the work or you might feel the work is attractive for no particular reason. If I dare to summarize these things, I guess it would be “preference.”

In the world of tea, there is a kind of grouping like “Rikyu Preference” or “Oribe Preference.” By “attraction” I mean admiring the “preference” of a rough grouping.

At the beginning of this piece, I wrote, “I can’t think of anything that could be the final ‘end’ (‘Kyu’) of ‘Johakyu’.” My “work” is a projection of an important condition in my “heart.” What will it look like at the “end”?... I hope you will take a look at my recent work, for example “Blue hole” and see if you can find that sense of “end.”